An Introduction to Modular Choreography

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There are four popular techniques for calling square dances: Memory, modular, mental image, and sight. Modules can be used in combination with any of the other three.

The oldest method is memorizing entire square dance routines. Almost everyone who calls uses this method at least part of the time. Many callers rely on memorized figures for their entire program.

Modular choreography came next when callers started to recognize that certain recognizable setups seemed to occur time after time and that groups of calls making up these blocks could be combined in different combinations to produce an almost infinite variety of dances.

There are numerous setups (FASRs) that have been documented by Bill Peters and others, but the three setups (FASR) that are most commonly used in building modules are a Zero (Static) Square (ZS), a Zero Box (ZB) and a Zero Line (ZL). Notice that each of these are capitalized because each refers to a specific formation (F), arrangement (A), sequence (S), and rotation (R) or FASR.

Using squares for men and circles for ladies and the caller standing at the bottom of the drawing, a Zero Square looks like the setup shown to the right. Everyone is in home position.

As a caller, you need to recognize that there are three other orientations of a Zero Square that are choreographically equal. In each case the setup (FASR) is the same, but the dancers are not at home position. To see these variations just rotate the page 1/4 turn at a time. It is very easy for the caller to recognize this, but the average dancer only recognizes when they are at home position. Figures called from this orientation will feel different than those called from home position.
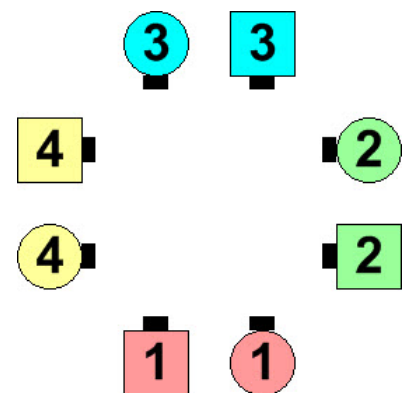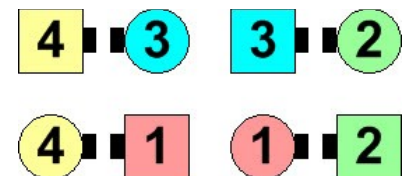
Figure 1: A Zero Square.

Zero Square to Zero Box Modules

The second setup recognized by most callers is the **Z**ero **B**ox (**ZB**). The most common way to arrive at this setup (FASR) is to have either the head or the side couples *Square Thru 4*.

If the heads *Square Thru 4* the result will look like the drawing to the right.
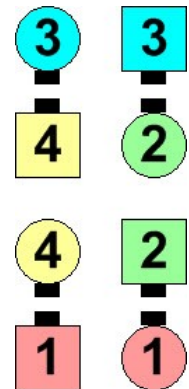
That's one way of getting there. Let's add a little interest to the trip. Try the following module of calls.:

> *Head Couples Promenade ½*
> *Pass Thru, Separate Around One*
> *In the middle, Pass Thru*

The dancers will arrive at the same setup as if you'd called *Square Thru 4*. The group of calls becomes a *setup module* that moves from a **Z**ero **S**quare to a **Z**ero **B**ox, or a **ZS-ZB** module.
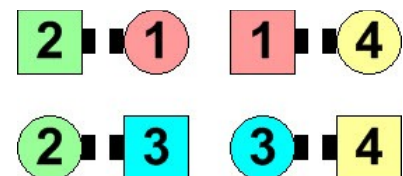
Keep in mind that the sides can be substituted for the heads and the resulting setup would still be a **Z**ero **B**ox (**ZB**) as shown to the right.

Just as with a **Z**ero **S**quare, the **Z**ero **B**ox can be rotated to four different positions with the head couples starting the sequence and four different positions if the side couples start the sequence. This gives a total of eight **Z**ero **B**ox setups where you, as the caller, know the set is resolved.

Modules can be as simple as the *Heads Square Thru* used in the first example to complex modules that move all four couples around the set such as the following **ZS-ZB** module. Notice that this module also flip flops the set.

> *Heads Star Thru / Double Pass Thru*
> *Centers In / Cast Off ¾ / Star Thru*
> *Zoom / Centers Right & Left Thru*
> *Centers Pass Thru*

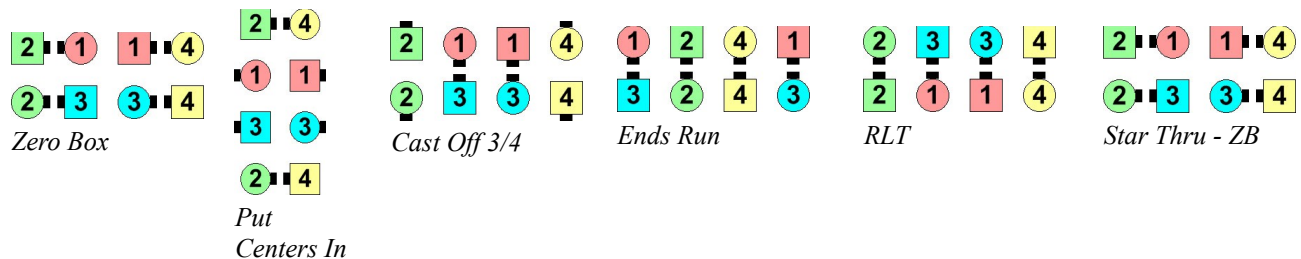**Moving From A Zero Box To Another Zero Box**
One of the most useful aspects of modular calling is amount of control you have over the choreography. You can plan a whole tip around an idea or theme. You can work in variations and build toward perhaps something really clever you plan on calling two or three tips down the line.

A good example can be found in a face to face Centers In. Many dancers are just not familiar with the concept and the rate of failure may be high. So you use a short **ZB-ZB** module that you know works to test the waters.

This module (illustrated on the following page) brings the dancers right back to the same point on the floor.

> *Put Centers In (face to face)*
> *Cast Off 3/4*
> *Ends Run*
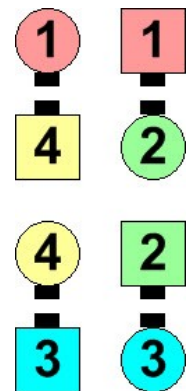> *Right & Left Thru*
> *Star Thru*

Editor's Note: The original manuscript didn't include diagrams for the above sequence. For the benefit of our newer caller readers, I've diagrammed the entire sequence. It's up to you to push checkers for everything else .

Zero Box   *Put Centers In*   *Cast Off 3/4*   *Ends Run*   *RLT*   *Star Thru - ZB*

Once you have that module working well on one side of the set, move the head couples over to the other side of the set and call the same ZB-ZB module. Sight resolve the set if you wish.

Now you're ready to move onto a more difficult sequence:

 Put Centers In (face to face) / *Cast Off ¾*
Centers Right & Left Thru
Pass Thru / Put Centers In
Cast Off ¾ / Slide Thru
Double Pass Thru
Lead Couples Partner Trade

At the end of this module you have exchanged the inside and outside couples (a technical zero) and turned the Eight Chain Thru Formation one quarter. You have the comfortable knowledge that the square is still resolved and all eight dancers have been able to dance a very interesting and different pattern.

This particular module can be used effectively twice in a row because we've switched the inside and outside couples and each pair of dancers are dancing a very different feeling part. Two times through returns the set to a true zero and flip flops the set.

The Get Out

We've now been through at least two points where the set was resolved. If things are not going well at these points you can bail out with just a Left Allemande. However let's assume the dancers have successfully completed your great choreography.

Maybe now is the time for a surprise get out that is just a little different. If you choose to stay with the Centers In Cast Off theme try the following ZB-AL module.

> *Turn Thru*
> *Turn ½ by the Left in the Center*
> *Pass Thru*
> *Put Centers In*
> *Cast off ¾*
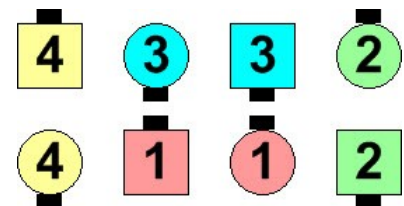> *Left Allemande*

Constructing a Module

In the above examples, the theme was obviously *Put Centers In* followed by a *Cast Off ¾*. The focus was a face-to-face *Put Centers In* instead of the usual couple-behind-a-couple *Put Centers In*. Something different.

How do you go about constructing such a module?

In my opinion, it is unwise to do this extemporaneously on the dance floor. I choose to do it at home with square dance checkers or a computer program
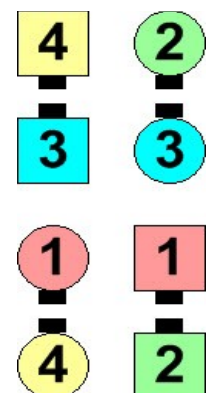
First you have to decide your starting point. In this case let's start from Zero Box. Once the dancers have completed the *Put Centers In* and *Cast Off ¾*, you have to look at the resultant FASR and decide on your options.

"Heads Square Thru 4 / Put Centers In / Cast Off ¾"

In this case, the motion of the *Cast Off ¾* dictates that the ends either need to stand still or do something that continues the direction of their forward motion. We've looked at *Ends Run* and Ends stopping.

A third option could be to have the *Ends Fold* while the *Centers Square Thru 3*. (See figure at right.)
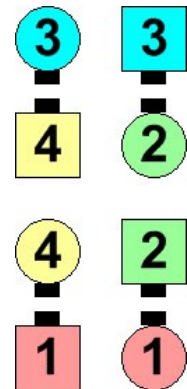
Now, we've got the head couples nicely paired with their partner. The sides aren't paired and they are Half-Sashayed. *Pass to the Center* will get the heads out of the middle and *Turn Thru* in the center will nicely resolve the Half-Sashayed side couples. In the process you've exchanged the inside and outside couples so you've made up a technical zero.

"Ends Fold, Centers Square Thru 3"

The total **ZB-ZB** module looks like:

> *Centers In*
> *Cast Off ¾*
> *Ends Fold*
> *Centers Square Thru 3*
> *Pass to the Center*
> *Centers Turn Thru*

Some Ground Rules for Your Consideration

Most of us are not blessed with a photographic memory. We remember short
blocks or sequences quite well, but as the string becomes longer we tend to fail in accurately remembering the sequence. I try and keep modules that I construct to *less than ten calls*...and I really favor seven or fewer calls.

There is a second reason for limiting the modules to this length. I've found that once I've explored a particular theme or idea, it really sharpens my skills to see how few additional calls I need to get them back to a zero point.

Over the years I've pretty much settled on creating only six types of modules out of all the setups documented by the "real" experts in this field.

These are:

- **Z**ero **S**quare to **Z**ero **B**ox (**ZS-ZB**)
- **Z**ero **S**quare to **Z**ero **L**ine (**ZS-ZL**)
- **Z**ero **B**ox to **Z**ero **B**ox (**ZB-ZB**)
- **Z**ero **L**ine to **Z**ero **L**ine (**ZL-ZL**)
- **Z**ero **B**ox to an **A**llemande **L**eft or **RLG** (**ZB-AL** or **ZB-RLG**)
- **Z**ero **L**ine to an **A**llemande **L**eft or **RLG** (**ZL-AL** or **ZL-RLG**)

Why? It makes my notes easy to file and to find. I quickly figured out that any zero is really a combination of zeros for every formation within the zero. I won't explain that further because that's another whole article by itself.

A Few Words About Equivalents

You can move people around a set with very few calls. *Right & Left Thru, 2 Ladies Chain, Star Thru, Pass Thru, Dive Thru/Pass to the Center*, and *Bend the Line* will do a lot. There are modules that mimic each of these. For example *Swing Thru / Spin the Top / Right & Left Thru* = *Star Thru*. One time I saw a book that had 1,001 equivalents for *Star Thru*. Most of us recognize that *Swing Thru Double* is the equivalent of a *Right & Left Thru* and so on.

Square Dancing is a *team effort*. When you square up, there are seven other people besides

yourself on that team. The ideal would be to dance with each of the other seven people at some point during the tip. Sometimes we don't do that; we just keep people comfortably close to the original corner and square dance becomes more a "two facing couples" dance than a "four couples" dance. If you plan ahead you can give the dancers the pleasure of dancing with all the people in the set.

Let's start out with a simple pattern and see one example of how this could work. Here is a very straight forward setup to a **Z**ero **B**ox.:
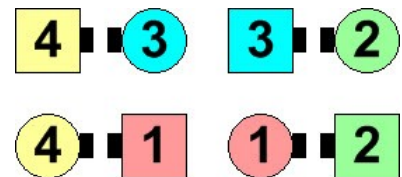
> *Heads Star Thru*
> *Centers Pass Thru*
> *Right & Left Thru the outside two*
> *Dive Thru* (or *Pass to the Center*)
> *Centers Pass Thru*
> (In ZB)

By substituting equivalent modules for *Star Thru*, *Pass Thru*, and *Right & Left Thru* and also using true zeros at the points where Eight Chain Thru formations occur, you can easily track both the progress of the dancers and provide a lot of variety. Here are some examples:

> Star Thru Equivalents
> * *Swing Thru / Centers Trade*
> * *Centers Run / Bend the Line*
> * *Spin the Top / Men Run / Wheel & Deal / Pass Thru / Partner Trade*
>
> Right & Left Thru Equivalents
> * *Swing Thru / Centers Trade*
> * *Turn Thru / Partner Trade*
> * *Pass Thru / Partner Trade*
>
> Pass Thru Equivalents
> * *Right & Left Thru with a full turn*
> * *Swing Thru / Men Trade / Turn Thru*

Now start substituting in various equivalents at the appropriate places and plug in a couple of box zeros and you have more than enough material for a complete patter tip with lots of variety.

Each couple has danced with every other couple in the set. As a caller, you have been able to easily track the progress of the dancers through the routine because you have numerous visual check points were you can physically observe that the square is progressing as planned. You win and the dancers win.

Why Bother?

Why bother to go to this kind of effort when you can just do it extemporaneously on the spur of the moment?

First, in going through the process you will learn a lot about square dance choreography that you won't learn on-the-fly. You can take a look at your options and the consequences of what you are calling. You will find that t*he more you do it the more options you will see*.

Second, you will become a much more interesting caller if you take the time to do your home-work at home and plan your dance. You can plan how to take an audience from the mundane to the fantastic instead of just hoping it will happen. The plan may not always work, but it's always worth the attempt.

Third and most important, writing modules is the only way you are going to permanently capture your flashes of brilliance and those of your peers. This is also important from a histor-ical viewpoint. Up until about the last ten years most of the innovative choreography was be-ing printed someplace. They could be used as a reference and a study guide for new callers. Today, much of the innovative choreography is called once and then lost for all time.

The 20 Minute Time Bind

In what was originally written as a 20 minute presentation, I can only hope to convince you that modules may be interesting and perhaps worth looking into further.

In this paper I've only scratched the surface of how modules work and really explored very little of the vast versatility of this method of calling. If you really want to explore the subject I would need at least four hours of your time.

Acknowledgement of the Pioneers

I don't want to leave this subject without giving credit where credit is due. Ricky Holden and Lloyd Litman wrote a book named *Instant Hash* which introduced the concept of modules to many of us. This is where we learned about a Box 1-4 and 1P2P lines. You can sometimes find this book in libraries. It's well worth reading.

Bill Peters greatly extended and refined the knowledge of modules in a book named the *The Mighty Module*. He was the one that first clearly defined the nomenclature for what became Setups, Zeros and get outs that we still use today.

The rest of us have just tagged onto their genius.

References of Interest

- *The Mainstream Square Dance Caller's Note Book,* Calvin Campbell

- *The Callers Text (*Chapter 16), Published by the American Square Dance Society. Chapter by Calvin Campbell

- *American Square Dance Magazine July 1982 through February 1985*. A monthly column named *Mostly Modules*, Calvin Campbell

- *The Mighty Module: A Square Dance Caller's Guide to Patter Calling*, Bill Peters, 1979

- *Modules Galore*, Bill Peters

Additional Resources on Modules

1. I wrote a column for *Square Dance Magazine* named *Mostly Modules* for three years before the magazine stopped publication in 1985. I'm going to take those articles and put them on Dropbox.

2. There is also a complete digitized version of SIO/SD Magazine on DVDs that is available from the Lloyd Shaw Foundation that has all of those articles and probably another dozen or so articles about square dance modules.

3. Bill Peters wrote several publications about using modules for calling. They were formerly available from DoSaDo.com, but that site no longer carries them. The books may be available online new or used at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, or Alibris.

   Bill didn't invent the idea of square dance modules, but he probably understood more about the underlying math principles that modules use than any caller that I knew. Unfortunately, Bill's publications only skim the surface of the subject. He was really just trying to provide tools to start to learn about modules for beginning callers.

4. Jay King wrote several books about various square dance topics. One book was titled, *Square Dance Calling Fundamentals*.   This book was updated by Gene Trimmer and was also sold by DoSaDo.com with Gene listed as the author. Again check online to see if new or used copies are still available.

5. The CALLERLAB website has many documents about modules. Finding some of them consists of accessing the CALLERLAB website and doing a search on the word "modules". The search engine will give you a confusing list that will contain all kinds of stuff. The most informative document to me on that list is *Sight & Modular Resolution Systems*. The document is mostly about Sight Calling, but the section on Modules is valuable. ***Editor's Note: This document can be found at https://goo.gl/JCkqVJ***

6. Finally there is my book, *All About Modules*. I believe is it the best single source about

modules you will ever find. If you want details about the subjects in that book, they can be found at http://d4bp.com/wp/square-dance-modules. if you have questions ask me. It costs $10, and is sold as a PDF ebook.

7. Vic Ceder (https://www.ceder.net) has an extensive website where you will find thousands of square dance modules organized by program. He uses almost the same labels as Bill Peters used and I use. https://www.ceder.net/choreodb/welcome.php

8. Rich Reel's All8.com has another extensive set of modules which can be very useful. Check it out at: http://www.all8.com/sd/calling/getout.htm

9. There used to be many other books available about square dance modules. Most of them are out of print. If you are a caller who is interested in knowing more about this subject, contact me directly. I have copies of most of them.

The bottom line is that a lot of references about calling techniques are gone. When the authors died, most of the time their books went out of print. The exceptions, I know about concerning modules, are noted above.

This means that newer callers have less and less access to knowledge they might be able to use. This is dangerous for them and for the dancers that hire them.

To combat this trend, I've placed two of my books in public domain. *The Caller/Teacher's Quick Reference Guide* (1975) and *The Mainstream Caller's Notebook* (1992) can be found in both hard copy and digital format at Denver University Penrose Library and at Colorado State University Morgan Library. There are also other copies around and if you can find them and want to copy them, be my guest.

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